Historian Frances A. Chiu has produced a work that takes the reader inside the times that inspired Thomas Paine to challenge the legitimacy of Old World systems of hierarchy and privilege. Anyone who has not read Paine’s Rights of Man (or not read it for some years) will benefit enormously by first reading this guidebook.

As a long-time student of Thomas Paine’s life and his contributions to our understanding of what constitutes just principles of governance, I found much in this guidebook that provided valuable context to the positions expressed by Paine on the important issues of his day and those that continue to haunt us in our own time. As Frances Chiu explains in the introduction:

“[T]his Routledge Guide aims to explicate, first and foremost, the arguments presented in the text itself while showing how Paine’s conceptualizations of rights, representative government, and inequality fit into the broader trajectory of liberal and progressive thought in Britain, America, and France.”

As I suspect Paine would agree, the times that tried men’s souls never really ended. They have a long, long history that nurtured Paine’s intellectual curiosity and contributed to the person Paine became. What Frances Chiu details are the many direct and indirect influences that found their way into Paine’s writing. He questioned all authority and relied on his own ability to think and reason to identify common sense solutions to what troubled humankind. As Chiu notes, Paine was drawn to the longstanding ought questions of philosophical inquiry:

“This concept of rights, however, has a much longer history, going back at least six centuries when the idea of a natural law (e.g., all men and living creatures endeavor to sustain themselves) eventually gave rise to the idea of a natural right (e.g., all men and living creatures have a right to sustain themselves) in texts on canon law.”

To Paine, the people of every society were engaged in a desperate struggle to realize what were their natural rights. As an Englishman, Paine cherished his own nation’s tradition of dissent and rebellion, imperfect in intent and outcome as this was. “For Paine,” writes Chiu, “it was the uprising of 1381 rather than the Magna Carta [1215] that warranted greater admiration.”

And, for good reason. Rather than the beginning of participatory governance, Magna Carta transferred power from the monarchy to aristocratic land barons interested in aggrandizement of their own privileges. Paine immersed himself in a quest to discover first principles, envisioning what life could be like for the dispossessed if only the people of every nation were governed by just law, justly enforced.

Paine had observed throughout his early life the severe deprivation experienced by Britain’s peasant population caused by landed privilege. Chiu introduces (or reintroduces) readers to both well-known and obscure proponents of systemic reform who to some extent shared the outrage conveyed by Paine in Rights of Man and, later, in Agrarian Justice.

Paine comes across in this guide as a person of sincere, if imperfect, heroic character. He was a visionary and an optimist, which led him to underestimate the staying power of entrenched privilege even when confronted by united opposition. One must remember that Rights of Man is written before Paine’s disillusionment with George Washington’s leadership and the Hamiltonian influence over the institutional development of the American republic has taken hold. He had not yet watched as the French liberals he admired were pushed aside by the Jacobins, imprisoned and so frequently executed. His later writings seem to be directed to distant future generations rather than to his contemporaries.

Frances Chiu speculates to what extent the main French intellectuals influenced Paine’s thinking. Although she concludes that “Turgot and the Physiocrats … are viewed as half-hearted economists more interested in ‘the administration of the government rather than the government itself’,” I think it is worth remembering that the one person who could be described as mentor to Paine was Benjamin Franklin, and Franklin thoroughly embraced the teachings of Quesnay and Turgot. Perhaps we can thank Franklin, then, for the extent to which Agrarian Justice is physiocratic. And yet, as explained by Chiu, Paine demanded far deeper systemic and progressive changes than almost anyone one might cite. Quoting Paine, she notes that he drew “attention to the ironic lack of civilized progress in the supposed ‘Old World’ countries.”

Many pages of my copy of this guidebook have passages highlighted for later reference. I will shortly do what I hope and expect others will do after reading this guidebook – read Rights of Man with new insight into the power of Thomas

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“Paine’s words ring true again when we consider the lack of overall happiness in his adopted country and other parts of the world where inequality has become a looming issue, especially where the misdeeds and crimes of the 0.01% go largely unpunished.”

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MORE about The Routledge Guidebook to Paine’s Rights of Man

Watch for an absorbing dialogue with Ed Dodson and Frances Chiu on SMARTTALK, a video program of the Henry George School of Social Science. A date has not been announced yet, but it will be ready soon at, http://www.hgsss.org/smart-talk/ Check the website from time to time in the near future to find this engaging discussion.

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Sent by Gene Jones, TPF Board member, Secretary of FLVCS ---adapted from flvcs website, Sept 2020